

THE TRANSFER OF POWER IN SOVIET RUSSIA

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AT STALIN'S DEATH

I

If one assumes the death of Stalin (it may, of course, have happened even before the release of the news of his stroke) I should expect the most profound and powerful stresses and strains within the Soviet hierarchy to occur.

The recent affair of the Kremlin doctors must have reflected the existence of serious intrigues and maneuvers over the succession. The death of Stalin, coming so close to this affair, is an indication that the succession had not been amicably and efficiently arranged before the event. The extraordinary character of today's communique, listing so many doctors, the Minister of Health, the Central Committee of the Party and the Council of Ministers, apparently indicates not only the desire to assure everyone that someone has not poisoned Stalin, but an extreme desire to spread the responsibility for the moment, over as wide an area as possible.

I do not believe, however, that the Central Committee or any other Party or Soviet body will choose a successor to Stalin, in any real sense of the word "choose". None of the potential successors would dare risk letting this happen.

The rules of this kind of operation can be observed in the history of any Oriental despotism or in the history of the succession in the Roman Empire. Rule #1 is that he who seizes the power does not allow anyone who might have been a rival to live very long. Knowledge of this rule is, of course, not conducive to ease of mind in the hierarchy.

Rule #2 is that the successful claimant does not allow any important figure upon whom he depended to secure the power to live very long either. Rule #2, however, conflicts with Rule #3 which is that all important members of the hierarchy must decide with desperate haste who the winner is likely to be and give him the earliest possible proof of absolute devotion. This means that Rule #3 is actually of a higher priority than Rule #2.

If there were no predominant claimant one might imagine that the instinct of self preservation would influence the top figures in the hierarchy to try to prevent any one claimant from securing the supreme power. This seems unlikely, however, for anyone who supports this solution may be registered as having failed in the early crucial moment to support the successful figure. Consequently one claimant is likely to be forced into the predominant role, even if he did not wish it, by the necessity of others to find security in allegiance to the most powerful figure.

Even if the obvious claimant, Malenkov, takes power, the above analysis indicates that there will inevitably be a large scale hatcheting of important figures, which may happen almost at once or be spread over two or three years. It might be thought that this could be accompanied by armed conflict between various elements of the army or the secret police as the men who were being eliminated were driven to desperate expedients. But this is unlikely.

Military or police chiefs, at whatever level, do not rise to defend men who are about to be liquidated. They will only risk their heads if the figure they are asked to support has a very great chance of success in seizing the supreme power. Armed conflict is likely to arise, therefore, only if there is some moment of uncertainty where there exists a rival candidate or candidates who can call upon potentially superior armed force.

This last qualification, of course, might be met if there were some Soviet general who could command the allegiance of an element of the Soviet armed forces sufficiently large to give him better than an even chance of success. This conjuncture seems most unlikely too, since every care and every means has been used to prevent this kind of power from residing in the hands of any general. One general or the other might support some political figure against another, if success were probable. At the present stage of events the seizure of power by a general appears only possible following conflict between major political figures, not as an initiating factor.

The attitude of the Russian people either towards the regime as a whole or towards alternative aspirants for the supreme power is likely to be of negligible importance under present circumstances. (The one exception to this is the case of Beria, reportedly Jewish, where the anti-semitic traditions of the Russian people would be a bar to any ambitions which he might otherwise hold.) Only after open and violent conflict had occurred in the hierarchy could any feeling of hatred for the regime among the masses of the people play a crucial role.

The probabilities then are that one man (probably out of the top political hierarchy) will come to power, either at once, or within a period of months, at most.

II

Does this make war a more or less likely early prospect than before Stalin's stroke? On balance, it appears to make it less likely. Stalin's successor will be extremely busy consolidating his power. It is not likely that war would simplify his task. It might, indeed, simplify the task for a general who wished to seize power or the generals of the armed forces might desire war as a means by which one of them or a committee of them might seize power during war. It is hardly conceivable, however, that a Soviet general who had not already seized the power could start a war under present circumstances even if he wanted to do so.

III

After Malenkov, or another, had consolidated his power he might be more or less likely to follow an aggressive and expansionist policy than has Stalin. (On the whole the prospects for peace could not well be much worse than they have been.) On this it would not be profitable to speculate further at the moment.

IV

In summary I believe that power will pass to one of the top figures in the Kremlin hierarchy other than a military figure. This passage of power may be quiet and bloody or explosive and bloody. It is more likely to be the first but the second possibility cannot be excluded even in the early stages. In the long run the explosive as well as bloody stage is likely to be reached but this might be a matter of years.

In a situation of extreme tension, such as now exists in the Kremlin, anything could happen. It is, however, unlikely that major military moves will be made until the succession is decided and consolidated.

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(signed) 

N. B. Since this analysis contains no classified data I am not observing the customary security regulations in transmitting it. I shall, of course, treat the matter as completely confidential.